

A Mediterranean Matri-Archive. Choreographic Fragments of Emerging Corporealities

Abstract: This paper aims to refigure the question of archive into a gender-critical perspective, and proposes the theorization of a Matri-Archive: an imaginary place of methodological analysis, a performance-zone which serves to retrieve the corporeal memories of women's creativity emerging from the liquid architecture of the Mediterranean sea. I rely on the philosophical-theoretical debate over the 'archive fever', which today still affects many voices of Dance and Performance Studies, in order to discuss the presumed ephemerality of a dance-event, and thus its (im-)possible archivalization. I envision myself an archivist who after experiencing the choreo-graphies produced by three female Mediterranean and postcolonial artists – N. Belaza; G. McMillen; N. Boukhari – attempts a series of archival exercises to argue the technical dissemination, and the poetical return, of their gestures in form of choreographic fragments. This writing virtually lands in Algeria, Turkey and Syria; from these Mediterranean edges, the three 'archons' begin to explore the multiple senses of 'what' a female corporeality can 'do/become' via the subversive power of dance language. A fragmentary consultation is here offered as an analytical and choreo-political practice, both to present some examples of female agency and eventually to state the urgency of acquiring alternative visions for alternative archives.

Keywords: *choreo-graphy, matri-archive, Mediterranean, digital-video performance, fragments*

The feminine is redefined as a moving horizon, a *fluctuating* path, a recipe for transformation, motion, becoming.
(Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*)

And this light is *unveiling*.
(Hélène Cixous, *Veils*)

How to preserve the memory of the flesh? ... While there remains this mystery of the touch that goes beyond *touching*, the intention of every gesture, how can one recall this permanence?
(Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*)

This paper intends to analyse the performing memory of the Mediterranean Sea by diving into the bodily gestures that its liquid archive saves, reserves and disseminates on the stage of contemporary *choreography*. I will consult the corporeal memories that dance, write on, and cross the region, imagining that they emerge from a 'matri-archive' intended as a visionary practice, an imaginary place of methodological analysis, a re-figured locus of deposition and transmission,

¹ The theoretical proposal for the 'matri-archive' finds its operativity in the project titled *M.A.M The Matri-Archive of the Mediterranean: Graphics and Matter* (P.O.R Campania 2007-2013), a digital archive devoted to the works of Mediterranean women artists, which is developed by a group of researchers and by myself in affiliation with the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. Please visit: <http://www.matriarchiviomediterraneo.org/en/>.

² See "The Mediterranean Expulsion Machine", in I. Law et al., *Mediterranean Racism: Connections and Complexities in the Racialization of the Mediterranean Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³ See the research study dealing with the complex articulation 'woman-migration' on the basis of the "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action" (1995): N. Piper, ed., *New Perspective on Women and Migration: Livelihood, Rights and Entitlements* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ See Carolyn Hamilton et. al, eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2002); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. P., 2009); Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 2013).

⁵ I cannot discern the writing activity from my dancing experience; in truth, I've given up dancing on the stage, but keep on moving with my thinking body, proceeding on the pages with attempts, 'steps' – *pas de hors-texte* – trying to move always inside-outside the textuality of the dancing languages that I encounter on my path.

within which female agency generates, composes and performs the poetical difference of creativity and the becoming presence of multiple subjectivities.¹

In the historical conjuncture, I witness the traumatic state of emergency affecting the Mediterranean. The incalculable flows of refugees that arrive in Italy and Greece from North Africa and Syria; the increasing number of migrants who lose their lives trying to cross the sea in makeshift boats, ferries and cargo vessels; the inequities and murderous consequences of EU's security-obsessed control of migration; the geo-political strategies operated by the "expulsion machine" of the fortress Europe:² these experiences constitute the direct results of the structural dependence between countries of emigration and immigration, the truth affirming that contemporary migration is integral to North-South postcolonial global relations. The commitment that lies behind my study, and the writing that follows, proves my responsibility in politically assuming the not-yet-elaborated trauma experienced by the European – specifically, the Italian – collective memory in the face of colonial legacy and power-relationship. If, in times of epochal border-restriction, the Euro-Mediterranean policy violates the right of freedom of movement, I invoke the necessity of a 'choreography' that reclaims the right to mobility.³ More clearly, my appeal is towards a 'historical choreography' which offers a bodily perspective for the multiple stories emerging from our colonial past, that conveys the different but shared experiences of our present, that disseminates the future of the Mediterranean towards a space and a time to-come. My desire is that, on the stage of this choreography, in the imaginary archive of the Mediterranean performance zone, new corporeal memories might gain the chance to move, to be saved, narrated and respected.

My writing assumes a practice of memorial care. In this sense, it is inspired by the critical discussion on the so-called 'archival turn' (which has been involving the Humanities and the Social Sciences since the early 1990s) by proposing the 'archive' as an apparatus which, bound by no means to its traditional definition as a repository of documents, is understood as a subject of inquiry and a strategic practice apt to re-configure and legitimate new forms of knowledge.⁴ Hence, I draw on the archival question through some exercises of thought, some interpretative 'steps' meant to situate an archive alternatively devoted to women, whose body movements have been constrained, marginalised and excluded by/from the patriarchal *arkē*.⁵

My 'steps' initiate at the crossroad of Dance Studies and Deconstruction, moving across the fleeting borders of dance aesthetics, video-dance and digital performance. Along these compositional patterns, there emerge the matri-archival works of three artists who disseminate their 'fragmentary' choreo-politics through the porosity of the Mediterranean Sea, along the lands and marine coasts of its liquid universe: the gestures of *Le Cri* by Nacera Belaza 'fluctuating' on the physical coasts of Algeria; the traces of *Mahrem* by Geyvan McMillen 'unveiling' the Turkish borders; the Syrian edges 'touching' the digital screens of Nisrine Boukhari's *The*

Veil. Algeria, Turkey and Syria represent the spaces where the choreographers Belaza, McMillen and Boukhari “commence” and “command” their dancing languages according to a different archival law, whose drive activates practices of corporeal knowledge which disseminate beyond the borders of the their (m-)other lands.⁶ In such a displacing movement, new memories are envisioned, re-produced and re-archived in other forms and according to new perceptions, elsewhere and otherwise.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression”, *Diacritics*, 25.2 (Summer 1995), 9.

Disseminating Mediterranean Memories

[D]ance ... cannot be played internally in its entirety ... especially because [the movement] the sign, the cipher moves away from its “here and now”, as if it were endlessly falling, forever here en route between here and there, from one here to the other, inscribing in the *stigmè* of its ‘here’ the other point toward which it continually drifts.
(Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*)

Investigating the archival sense-making of choreo-*graphy*, I adopt the concept of “dissemination”, offered by the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, to explain how choreography – behind and beyond its differences, historical traditions or multiple styles – can be defined as a system of signs and memories which is always already ‘differed’ and ‘dislocated’ in time and space.⁷ I unfold the deconstructionist trope in order to discuss the energies of the choreographic languages that let their meanings/memories proliferate, keeping many archival possibilities open. Marking a pattern of ‘steps’, I would like to identify the space of this disseminating process in the compulsory drive for a Mediterranean archive, and, together, in the search for ‘other’ gendered choreographic memories.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1981).

Step n. 1: archiving ‘otherness’

Nothing is thus more troubled and more troubling today than the concept archived in this word ‘archive’.
(Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*)

Iain Chambers maintains that “the Mediterranean as a sea of migrating cultures, powers, and histories, continues to propose a more fluid and unstable *archive*, a composite formation in the making, neither conclusive nor complete”.⁸ If this is true, the Mediterranean sea becomes the site where to retrieve the ‘fragments’ of dance’s cultural memory, whose display is always differentiating, ungraspable, fleeting, and whose un-archivable *technè* is “never composite nor complete”.⁹ The archival project-logic, whose disturbing groove is proposed by Chambers as a re-routing of the repressed alterity of the Mediterranean within modernity, is embraced as the necessary support for the revaluation of the ‘otherness’ of dance,

⁸ Iain Chambers, “The Mediterranean, a Postcolonial Sea”, *Third Text*, 18.5 (2004), 423-433.

⁹ Ibid.

and, at the same time, for the envisioning of the Mediterranean as the methodological resource-zone for alternative critical-aesthetical investigations.

In her inquiry into the political and social significance of dance aesthetics, Gabriele Klein touches on those discourses that, in modernity, entrusted dance to the condition of the ‘outsider’, the ‘Other’ of western rationality. Regardless of what style, artistic practice or tradition, dance has been and is “a world of the body and the senses, of movement and feelings, as a world of metaphors, for which words fail us ... an alternative world, namely a world beyond language and rationality”.¹⁰ This state of dance’s otherness asserts, in fact, its subversive power and emancipatory potential, from which to insist on claiming its mandate of avant-garde and counter-narrative. It is what allows, by anticipating it, the movement into the critical correlation of dance aesthetics, archival praxis, and forms of ‘otherness’ in the Mediterranean today. Dance is envisioned as the field of an historical generation of cultural and political meanings, the making of ‘worlds’ negotiated through corporeal languages, the ex-scription/in-scription of experiences, the recordings of subjective and collective trans-formations in a new *arkè* of the choreographic.

¹⁰ Gabrielle Klein, “Dancing Politics: Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography”, in Gabriele Klein, Sandra Noeth, eds., *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2011), 17.

Step n. 2: *arkè* and choreographic knowledge

We are *en mal d'archive*: in need of archives.
(Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*)

¹¹ For a historical overview on ephemerality see Susanne Franco, Marina Nordera, *Ricordanze: memorie in movimento e coreografie della storia* (Torino: Utet, 2010); on its theoretical, creative and political impact see for example Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹² Marcia B. Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1969), 1.

¹³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

Since the so-called ‘choreographic turn’, initiated by European and North American post-modern performers, dance has been struggling to come to terms with its ‘ephemerality’.¹¹ It was in 1968 when Marcia B. Siegel famously declared that “Dance exists at a perpetual vanishing point ... It is an event that disappears in the very act of materializing”.¹² In performance studies, the idea of the ‘ephemeral’ has gained a constitutive status: positing and declaring the ontological ‘disappearance’ of a performance event is, for scholars of the late twentieth century such as Peggy Phelan, a veritable mantra applied to all live events: “Performance becomes itself through disappearance”.¹³

By taking up the invitation of dance and performance studies to consider the dancing event as ephemeral, always destined to disappearance, how is it possible to respond, keeping memory of dance’s fluid and elusive essence, to what Jacques Derrida calls the ‘compulsory drive’ to archive? In his introduction to the volume *Dance*, the theorist André Lepecki individuates five qualities of dance: ‘ephemerality’; ‘corporeality’; ‘precariousness’, ‘scoring’ and ‘performativity’.¹⁴ This constitutive trait of dance-identity, *performativity* (understood as a theory of the ways in which statements and promises acquire a world-making force), becomes central to the ‘archive fever’ in that it “produces a condition of endless citationality of an always singular yet always dispersed (or semi-absent) source, which nevertheless

¹⁴ André Lepecki, “Dance as a Practice of Contemporaneity”, in André Lepecki, ed., *Dance* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 14-23.

insists on making a dance return: again and again, despite (or rather because of) its ephemerality”.¹⁵ Against the claim of the absence and disappearance of dance, its persisting, resisting, and returning emergence necessarily activates the archival vocation-fever. If dance leaves no ‘object’ behind its performance, it keeps on ‘emerging’ inside and outside the flesh-matter of the dancing body; what remains is the – shared – experience, and the – fragmented – memory of the event.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In such an experience and in this memory, the body becomes a living archive: the flesh of the dancer’s body functions as an archival site; her corporeality embodies, stratifies, and ‘disseminates’ the cultural-kinetic expression of the encountered languages. Quoting Rebecca Schneider, Elaine Aston remarks that this transforms the canonical conceptualization of the archive, and allows for the chance of registering the knowledge of the corporeal: “If what remains in not the material art object ... cannot we understand and accept this as a different way of archiving: as one that embraces the possibility of the performing, storytelling body as archive; an embodiment of counter-cultural memory?”¹⁶

¹⁶ Elaine Aston, “Feminist Performance as Archive”, *Performance Research*, 7.4 (December 2002), 81.

Step n. 3: *chora* of a new ‘hospitality’

Chora receives everything or gives place to everything.... Everything inscribed in it erases itself immediately, while remaining in it.
(Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*)

The archival praxis of thinking choreography and the ephemerality of dance is informed by, and performed into, a gender-critical perspective. A feminist re-figuration of spatiality is evoked via the notion of ‘chora’, a place of dissidence within which women discover, deposit and house the subversive potentiality of corporeality. As seen by Elizabeth Grosz: “the notion of *chora* serves to produce a founding concept of femininity whose connections with women and female corporeality have been severed, producing a disembodied femininity as the ground for the production of a (conceptual and social) universe”.¹⁷

¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Women, Chora, Dwelling”, in E. Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 113.

If the archive (its ‘name’) has patriarchal origins (the patrilineal demand of the *arkeion*, the ‘house’ where power resides; the *archons* commanding, safeguarding, repeating and selecting the order, the law, the tradition), what happens when and if women become the archons of their (proper, *à-même le corps*) body knowledge? What takes place when they access an-other conceptualization of the archive, without generating a reversal exercise of inclusion-exclusion, linguistic hegemony and subalternity, but to document the re-appearance of female graphic gestures, and the re-participation to/of forgotten corporeal stories? The matri-archive is conceived as a space of creation, knowledge, cognition, invention and survival, where women act as agent ‘archons’. In a vindication of roles, women “commence” and “command” their body writing; they innervate the “conservation” and the “destruction” of their kinetic abilities.¹⁸ In so doing, they

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.

re-act against the “laws” transmitted by the Western system of dance composition, using their body-scape as the site of contested memories and for the production of counter-narratives, affecting the dissemination of traditional choreo-graphic gestures into scenes of new embedded body languages.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (New York: Panytheon, 1972); Christie Adair, *Women and Dance, Sylphs and Sirens* (New York: New York U. P., 1992).

The Fragments of the Matri-Archive

She is simply her watery translucent self ... She will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers.

(M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*)

The matri-archive is envisioned as a poetical *chora*, a house of the archiving process that works as the ‘mothering’ structure for the being and the becoming of the performance of movement. As the dance theorist Stephen Turk underlines, the word *chora* resonates with the word *choros*, the round dance, the open dancing, the ground enclosure: “both are related to the Indo-European roots *gher-* (to grasp, to bind, to enclose) and *ghe-* (to release, to go, to abandon)”.²⁰ The un-fixed pairing of binding and releasing, saving and forgetting, preserving and dissolving, recalls the dynamics that rules the gathering-disseminating phenomenology of memory. Michel de Certeau observes that (choreographic) memories emerge in unexpected, un-predictable, and sensible ways:

Perhaps memory is no more than this ‘recall’ or call on the part of the other, leaving its mark like a kind of overlay on a body that has always already been altered without knowing it. This originary and secret writing ‘emerges’ little by little, in the very spots where memory is touched.²¹

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Barkley, Los Angeles, London: UCP, 1988), 87.

If, on the plane of performativity, the memory of an event, with its traces, marks, corporeal inscriptions or *phantasmata*, emerges ‘little by little’, what is then produced is a collection of fragments, “detritus”, and “remains”.²² These are the ex-corporated touches and intensities that, through the time-space they contemporaneously materialize, become in-corporated acts, ‘escapes’ that keep on living, re-living, resisting and re-existing in the spectrality of the afterlife. These fragments coincide with the disseminated mnemonic graphic movements saved both ‘inside’ the corporeality of the dancer and ‘within’ the bodily perception of the audience. This logic of fragmentation echoes Michael Foucault when he reminds us that the fragment allows the archive to fulfil its function of being a “repository” but, first of all, “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements”.²³ This transformative activity conceives the archive as a mode of thinking, where the fragmentary gestures are considered as moments of enunciation, the ‘taking place’ or the actualization of statements. The theatre

²² See Matthew Reason, “Archive or Memory: The Detritus of Live Performance”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 19 (2003); R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*.

²³ M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 130.

scholar Michal Kobialka points out that the archival research is, indeed, fragmentary, constituting, in its own mode, the very “act of enunciation” of the performing event:

... this enunciation is not a thing determined by the reality of effects (Barthes, Racière) or the *habitus* (Bourdieu), but a function of existence exposing the intelligibility of the past and the present by exploring the relationship between a document and its taking place, between the materiality of a document and the impossibility to archive its language.²⁴

²⁴ Michal Kobialka, “Historical Archives, Events and Facts”, *Performance Research*, 7.4 (December 2002), 7.

Performative fragmentation is a dynamic process of rearrangement, that prevents the ‘enunciated’ memory-trace – or choreographic gesture – to consolidate into an established form. This subversive will to (un-)archive can be ‘consulted’, as I will do here, in specific feminist practices or, more singularly, in the ability of creation of female dancing subjectivities who, by relinquishing the idea, the desire or the nostalgic drive for fixity, re-archive the dominant systems of dance composition in nomadic ways where feminine cultural activities become and remain visible.²⁵

²⁵ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2011), 57.

In the Mediterranean matri-archive, the fragment serves as a practice of thinking-searching choreographically, working to retrieve excluded bodies, forgotten voices, hidden movements, and traces of negated otherness. In the liquid space of the sea and of another archive, one can contemplate the emergence of unfixed forms of female agency, the choreo-politics of a bodily affirmation-enunciation that erupts through the memory of the present, at the same time disturbing the very destiny or ‘future’ of Mediterranean modernity. In Iain Chambers’ vision:

The fragment, the forgotten voice, the ignored body, points to, even if it cannot represent, the disturbance and interrogation sedimented in the history that has consigned us to our time and place.²⁶

²⁶ I. Chambers, “The Mediterranean, A Postcolonial Sea”, 424.

The choreographic event, recalled in the form of fragmented, ‘fluctuating’, ‘unveiling’ and ‘touching’ memories, is connected to the *milieu* out of which it generates, and to the ‘affective attunement’ it entrusts to the dancing bodies. According to the perspective offered by Erin Manning, “No events occur in a vacuum – event and milieu are always cogenerative.... [T]he milieu cannot be understood in spatial terms. It is an affective attunement more than a space, a field more than a form”.²⁷ If affect belongs to the milieu, the dancing body comes – becomes, emerges – in the creative articulation of an “ecology of practices”, that is, through the multiple modulation of relational forces that activate an affective difference: “a different ecology soon emerges. This ecology is marked by a new field of affect”.²⁸

²⁷ Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke U. P., 2013), 26.

²⁸ Ibid.

The ‘ecological’ approach helps connecting the study-proposal of the matri-

archive of female bodily memories, to the study of *οἶκος*, the house that hosts the poetics of corporeal practices in Mediterranean ‘environments’. Indeed, Manning’s ‘more than human’ praxis is enunciated by, extended through, and disseminated in the performances created by Belaza, McMillen and Boukhari, in the singularity and difference of their works. Their creations exceed the liquidity of the Mediterranean live-stage to be re-actualized, dislocated and differed on specific global digital *milieux*. In their experimentations, the liveness of the body-writing moves, appears and dis-appears along multiple digital architectures. It is the trans-formation of the performing stage that provokes a series of questions posed and possibly re-posed along the ‘steps’ of my writing: how do the new aesthetics of contemporary dance manage the juxtaposition of flesh and the virtual? In what ways do female bodies articulate creative energy? What is their relation to space and time? How do they conceptualize and perform spectral – thus un-archivable – otherness?

Fluctuating

Everything comes from the body ... Connect, relax and find that space that has
ALL sounds ... Don’t let yourself to be restricted by the space. Expand your
limits....
(Nacera Belaza)

Born in Médéa, Algeria, the dancer and choreographer Nacera Belaza moved to France, where she first studied French literature, to decide to devote herself to dance. In 1989 she founded the *Compagnie Nacera Belaza*, a group gathering dancers from Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine, and allowing the productive meeting of the various performing differences present in the Mediterranean region.²⁹ What difference does Belaza’s style incarnate? The artist seems to have met the aesthetics of dance without attending academic schools, or learning any specific choreographic technique, proving resistant to the ‘commandment’ of a choreographic knowledge canonically established from the ‘outside’. Differently, as a female archon, Belaza ‘commences’ the movement of her body language thanks to the physical law generated in her-self, in her story and in her identity:

²⁹ Nacera Belaza <http://www.cie-nacerabelaza.com>, accessed July 2014.

I never took contemporary dance because I knew I didn’t want to learn anything from outside. I had no choice. I had to find my own path. I had to find another way to live in my body, to make it move ... and what is the best starting point if not yourself?”³⁰

³⁰ N. Belaza, interviewed by Ariel Osterweis, “Inside Spaces, Spaces Inside”: <http://pica.org/2013/09/10/inside-spaces-spaces-inside/>, accessed September 2014.

Belaza enters into an internal, sacred and sensible space from where she releases, and donates, the transformative consciousness of her body-space: “When you go inside yourself, you create the space. You create the consciousness of the space. It’s not the space as it is. You transform the space with this consciousness”.³¹ This approach enables the choreographer to create an affective



Fig. 1: Nacera Belaza, portrait, photo, courtesy by Compagnie Nacera Belaza.

milieu, whose time is in-finite in its finitude, and where new potentialities are invented and selected by/for her, *à même soi*, so as to be able to share “a space, in which time no more plays a role, a space in which we touch upon the infinite and finally are able to share something”.³²

In 2008, Belaza performs the intense a-temporal duet entitled *Le Cri* with her sister Dalila. Immersed in a dark scenography, moving out from an intimate bound, the two women bring fragments – ‘fluctuating’ gestures – on the stage. Converged at the scene centre, close one to the other, they start a-synchronic graphic gestures, their feet anchored at the same point of ‘arrival’, their arms slowly rotating and oscillating. The pattern ‘release-receive-

become’ and the repetition-variation of fluctuating movements carry the dancers into a state of trance. It is the physical-kinetic choreographic ‘en-trance’, where Nacera and Dalila’s corporealities cross and pass over, merging into a counter-dance that enunciates vitality, energy, passion, and life. The music increases, the dark scene-sea gets brighter, the dancers start ‘crying’. Frenetical yells through their bodies cut the space, scraping, engraving, affecting the air, letting a primordial energy emerge from the inside and reach the outside. The experience of movement negation and, at the same time, the chance of an archival vocation dig inside, desperately searching for a counter-movement affirming the right to mobility:

... in *Le Cri* ... we are stuck in the same place ... digging inside of us, trying to find a very deep energy to throw out. This is how I did it in my life. I couldn’t go out, I couldn’t travel, I couldn’t explore, so I said, I will dig inside of myself. It’s another way to find freedom.³³

The minimalist quality of the fragmented gestures hypnotizes the viewer, who shares the experience by moving along the corporeal senses of what the dancing bodies feel on the stage.³⁴ Indeed, the movements are not meant to make the spectator feel good or pleased (in the live performance, the sound is so loud that the spectators are to be provided with earplugs); differently, the viewer is invited to accept the ephemerality of the gestures, embracing the abstract transformation of their repetitions and variations, their work’s re-turned dissolution. In this way the fluctuating gestures assume a *phantasmatic* quality, constituting a fragmented-lasting female memory that persists even when the event de-materializes, as a remaining trace, a performing survival, the ‘absent’ motion that stays on even more ‘present’ at the end of, and after, the performance.

What is intriguing is that, in *Le Cri*, the sound is transmitted in different and alternating styles, volumes and rhythms: Larbi Bestam’s Arabic chants, the powerful voice of Maria Callas, the blues of Nina Simone, Amy Winehouse’s

³² N. Belaza interviewed by Soumaya El Houbba, “Becoming a circle: Expanding movement with Nacera Belaza”, *AL.Arte.Magazine*, March 2013, <http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-culture/becoming-a-circle-in-understanding-nacera-belaza/>, accessed September 2014.

³³ N. Belaza, <http://pica.org/2013/09/10/inside-spaces-spaces-inside/>, accessed August 2014.

³⁴ See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011).

contemporary soul. One possible reason for this choreographic choice might be that the dancing bodies receive, host, bear, and embody all possible ‘beats’, as Belaza says: “You ... are not just a space but an empty space ... you receive ALL the sounds.... When you learn to receive, you will learn to become the embodiment of every sound that you bear”.³⁵ The balance established among the plurivocal sounds testifies to the choreo-political challenge to intersect tensions and contradictions in/to Belaza’s female subjectivity: “the human is really a balance between many contradictions.... And I had to deal with those [contradictions] because I am woman, Arabic, Muslim, and at the same time I want to dance”.³⁶

³⁵ N. Belaza, <http://pica.org/2013/09/10/inside-spaces-spaces-inside/>, accessed August 2014.

³⁶ Ibid.

Belaza dances, and in so doing, she discloses the physical and cultural deposit of her French-Algerian, Mediterranean postcolonial and trans-national identity in the archive of her body. She dances, fluctuates, cries and disseminates the presences of her vital corporeality. Here the matri-archival sense-making of the dancer’s body-writing seems to resemble what Hélène Cixous, in her manifesto of *écriture féminine*, asks women to develop, that is, the special relationship to the voice, the “voice-cry” of anger that troubles – without return – the cultural order that pushes feminine agency “offstage”.³⁷

³⁷ Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 94.

Belaza’s ‘voice-cry’ demands to be heard and remembered differently – in the same way in which the fighting voices rising during the Arab revolutions reverberate across the Mediterranean. It is the artist’s political vocation: *Le Cri* documents the *agency* of female subjectivity emerging from the Mediterranean in the ritual of a choreographic belonging escaping fixed and immobile rules of existence. The fluctuating gestures and kinetic wakes propagated by the female bodies, disseminate beyond the stage to be able to merge into the theoretical movement that Rosi Braidotti would advocate to the “nomadic subject”: a “transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is the reason why s/he can make connection at all”, a feminist-oriented nomadism in the “acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries”.³⁸

³⁸ R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 35-36.

‘Choreographic nomadism’: aware of the non-fixity of her dancing identity, Belaza exceeds the limits of her corporeality to disseminate her fragmented



Figs. 2–3: *Le Cri*, Nacera&Dalila Belaza, 2006, photo ©Agathe Poupeney and Laurent Philippe



gestures on a liquid virtuality. At the end of the performance, Nacera and Dalila abandon the milieu of their presence to re-appear and re-emerge, as spectral entities, on a screen positioned at the end of the stage. There, the movements of the performance are recalled in/on a re-invented ground, as if the work re-articulated the potentiality of the fluctuating gestures in a micro-technical dimension. In “Dancing the Virtual”, Erin Manning describes the system generated by these micro-movements as “the imperceptible force that activates all movement. They are the force in germ of movement-moving”.³⁹ According to this perspective, if and when corporealities migrate onto virtuality, it is because the resistance and re-existence of their gestures allows for the emergence of a potential, embodied, and new relational force. It could then be stated that Belaza’s experimentations with technology consign the germ of a new dancing movement to the Mediterranean matri-archive, an un-sprouted seed waiting to be re-archived in the fragmentary repetition of its event.

³⁹ Erin Manning, “Dancing the Virtual”, *The Swedish Dance History*, vol. 2 (Stockholm: University of Dance and Circus/Vienna: ImpulsTanz, 2010), 588.

Un-Veiling

During my career as a dancer I found that we are so focused on dance that we do not open our eyes for other subjects.
(Geyvan McMillen)

The archival drive lands in Istanbul, focusing now on the work of Geyvan McMillen, the woman-artist who has consistently contributed to the experimental diffusion of modern dance in Turkey. Her professional life is the intense witness to this vocation. After absorbing the folkloristic tradition at the Turkish Conservatory, the pioneer choreographer learns the techniques of ballet imported by Dame Ninette de Valois, the founder of the Royal Ballet of London, who, during the 30s and the 40s, played an ‘imperialistic’ role in the Turkish promulgation of ballet.⁴⁰ At the time, McMillen disclosed her body-archive to western dance languages by studying the techniques that Graham and Cunningham created in England and USA. Today, she is involved in projects characterized by an inventiveness that merges dance theatre and video installation. She also worked as a resident choreographer at the National State Opera and Ballet, in the role of founder and director of the Yıldız Technical University Modern Dance Department (1998-2008). Since 2005 she has been leading the *Istanbul Dance Theatre* (IDT+) that develops ideas of training technique starting from traditional gestures of the kinetic Turkish culture. Some examples are provided by the re-articulation of the ‘*Sıfı Whirling*’ meditative gesture or her re-elaboration of the ‘Turkish Oil Wrestling’, the kinetic practice meant to discover strength, force and speed in partnering composition.⁴¹ As the ‘archon’ of her choreographic practice, in her commitment to education, McMillen promulgates – commences and commands – a choreographic heritage of Turkish culture, accepting and resisting, embodying

⁴⁰ See Susan Bauer, “Modern Dance Developments in Turkey, 1990-2005”, *World Dance Alliance Global Assembly 2006 – Proceedings*, <http://www.worlddancealliance.org/Publications.html>, accessed October 2013.

⁴¹ See <http://www.istanbuldanstiyatrosu.com>, accessed September 2014.

and negotiating, the various influences, identities and differences that have come up in her complex and creative encounter with Western otherness:

I am Turkish and I work within that culture and body. I am not nationalistic. But I do say: I cannot be a Westerner. We eat differently, we talk differently, we communicate differently, we have different rhythms in our bodies and we have different music. Everything is very different from the West. But also I have to follow what we have today in this culture, not go back to the old culture.⁴²

⁴² G. McMillen interview “If you eat only spinach, it makes you become spinach”, Internationaler tanztausch ruhr 6/13. 2002, http://old.pact-zollverein.de/medien/_english/_pdf, accessed September 2014.

From her choreo-politic positionality, McMillen wishes to ‘un-veil’ the silences and troubles embedded in the process of Turkish political-cultural modernization. Dance provides her with a language that denounces, by bringing to light hidden and in-visible stories, the sexual abuse and subjugation of Turkish women. *Mahrem* (The Hidden) is a piece created in 2006, which represents the testimony of the women resisting the veiled, in-visible forms of male predominance. The work narrates the untold memories relegated offstage, the sexual and corporeal abuses, the gestures of physical and intellectual violence that women, in patriarchal societies, suffer in their homes. McMillen stages performing acts that Judith Butler would describe as the consequences of the “normative violence” experienced by women under the laws of male constraint.⁴³ The choreographer frames the corporeal violation, the manipulation and domination, the gestures of oppression and power that humiliate female subjectivity inside and outside the national ‘setting’. This scenes of violence are composed by sequences of female dancers violently dragged and pushed by male performers; all forms of rebellion seem to be forbidden. On the stage the women perform their roles of ‘slaves’ or ‘concubines’, offering docile belly dances to the controlling male gaze. Their dance is, at the same time, the un-veiled expression of commitment, courage and resistance. As Rossella Battisti repeats, Geyvan McMillen “has the courage to rip off the veil and to convey the other half of the sky obscured and mortified by a return to fundamentalism that wants to see women suffocated, dominated and enslaved”.⁴⁴

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso), 2004.

⁴⁴ Rossella Battisti, introduction to *Mahrem*, video: <http://vimeo.com/7514483>, accessed September 2014.

In the choreo-political dance of hidden stories dwells the poetical resistance of a counter-story, the counter-gesture that condenses the intensity of the subversive force of women. Indeed, in the temporal de-materialization, fragmentation, and dissimulation of this event, there remains the act of ‘un-veiling’. The dancers are covered-wrapped-hidden by a veil, over-imposed as physical and intellectual coercion by the male dancers. Slowly, the women start their rebellion, enacting the un-veiling of bodies’ movements and the writing of *jouissance* on stage. Gradually coming ‘out’ from the fabric that entangles and conceals them, the dancers occupy the space that inscribes their newly-born corporealities in a shocking nudity. Bursting through the lifeless veil-matter, the triumph of flesh constitutes a resisting *phantasmata*, the fragmentary memory-gesture that re-archives and enunciates survival – a female survival, full of life, which refuses to be contained anyhow. If,

in Derrida's words, the matri-archive might signify "the question of the future, the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow ... in the times to come",⁴⁵ the memory of the un-veiling is the spectral anticipation, the not-yet, the still-to-come, the statement of the life potentiality, subjectivity meeting the emergence-inception of *naissance* through dancing. Jean Luc Nancy envisions such an emerging gesture – *gestation* – of dance as the thinking and performing practice that re-positions and disseminates (her) multitude of languages:

⁴⁵ J. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 27.

... an inception: the dance of a birth ... not a gesture. It is rather a *gestation*... These are the multiple spaces where dance emerges, and with any doubt there isn't only one, primordial, dance, but always and already the one or the other, a plurality of steps as well as a multitude of languages.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Jean Luc Nancy, Mathilde Monnier, *Alliteration: Conversation sur la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), 142. My translation.

The female dancers of *Mahrem*, before abandoning the scene, turn their back to the spectators, the silent and complicit witnesses of the un-veiled story. On a digital white screen the projection of undistinguishable shapes of male bodies appear-disappear, as threatening waves, in various measures and sizes. It is the instant when McMillen acts out her corporeal strategy to activate unexpected relations between organic and mechanical bodies, the digital and the analogue. As a choreographer-archon, she disseminates her space of invention/intervention along imperative steps of fluid manner, translating and materializing on the dancing scene what Elif Shafak narrates, suggests and hopes for her literary audience: "Do not go with the flow, be the flow".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* (London: Penguin, 2010), 91.

The non-verbal language used by McMillan embodies what remains entangled in the weave of Turkish culture, a society that, while experiencing its 'liquid' and transformative modernization, reiterates physical, political and intellectual 'hardness'. Considering the choreographer as an archivist who collects female stories tainted by emergency, and who displays what is repressed and hidden by the dominant order, we are invited to confront, consult, and un-veil the shameful gestures of patriarchal domination inside and outside the Mediterranean area. The potentiality of McMillan's matri-archive creates a space of hospitality for the sharing and the elaboration of female traumas, the search of forms of corporeal survival and choreographic resistance.

Touching

It is not impossible to rip any veil; it is in vain to hide an idea.
(Nisrine Boukhari)

My last thinking-dancing step crosses the Syrian borders to consult *The Veil*, the performance created by Nisrine Boukhari in 2007.⁴⁸ Boukhari is a mixed media and

⁴⁸ See Nisrine Boukhari's Blog. <http://nisrineboukhari.com>, accessed May 2014.

installation artist who explores the psycho-geographical intersection between environment and behaviour, experimenting on the interactive and visual ‘touches’ activated by an aesthetic use of colour and light therapy. She has played a crucial role in the Syrian art milieu, conducting, with her sister, *AllArtNow*, the first independent collective space for contemporary visual artists. Founded in 2005, originally situated in Damascus, this laboratory closed its doors in July 2012 “to open it to Syrian refugee families and starts to work in different places in the world as a nomadic space”.⁴⁹ If the organisation’s initial focus was to establish virtual links to the international art world through the Internet, it serves today as a home for local and international artists who can exchange ideas and establish collaborations.

⁴⁹ See <http://www.allartnow.com>, accessed July 2014.

Boukhari cannot be said to be a choreographer or a dancer, but in *The Veil* she signs the im-materiality of her digital screen with the consistency or ‘matter’ of a dancing corporeality emerging from, and touching on, the surface of a veil. In this video work, an un-discernible figure moves behind a red veil, choreographing ephemeral gestures according to the rhythms of fractal sonorous vibes. The gestures are ex-scribed inside-outside the monochromatic texture of the veil, flouting like a dancing ‘Medusa’. The viewer’s eyes perceive and distinguish the traces left by the touching body that pushes, weights, crushes, squeezes, slips, grabs, and stretches the moving-moved texture. While bodily forms press against the screen, boundaries blur and merge in ‘con-tact’ with the digitality of the video-veiled image. The monochromatic connection of veil, body and matter links substance, weight and gravity, creating a digital corporeality that, in its spectral *revenant*, calls – or recalls – for sensible and sensuous reactions, for new critical approaches.

The Canadian media theorist and curator Laura Marks explores the ways in which a “haptic approach might rematerialize our objects of perception, especially now that optical visibility is being refitted as a virtual epistemology for the digital age”.⁵⁰ Positioning “haptic visibility” and “optical visibility” on the opposite ends of the spectrum, by privileging the ‘haptic perception’ for its tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive function, the author maintains that the eyes work as the true organs of touch:

⁵⁰ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii.

It involves thinking with your skin, or giving as much significance to the physical presence of another as the mental operations of symbolization. This is not a call to wilful regression but to recognizing the intelligence of the perceiving body.... In the dynamic movement between optical and haptic ways of seeing, it is possible to compare different ways of knowing and interacting with an-other.⁵¹

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

If ‘haptic visibility’ is a tactile seeing and knowing, which involves the viewer’s body and intelligence, Boukhari video-choreography constructs and disseminates

her 'haptic images' inviting for a 'haptic experience'. In consulting the electronic texture of this video, the viewer is not required to identify what s/he is seeing; s/he must sense it with her/his body-archive, treating the alterity of the digital surface as a skin, expressing the infinite possibilities of sensing, his or her proprioceptive memory caressing the other. This dialectic, corporeal, and sensible relation resonates with Luce Irigaray's notion of the feminist 'touch', that responds to the call of the (m)other, an action which, when and if cultivated, provides the chance of intimate communication, which is still able to "save us".⁵²

⁵² Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008), 2; "Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us", *SubStance*, 40.3 (2011).

Behind and beyond the veil, the memory of tactility disseminates perception across the malleable fluidity of Boukhari's Mediterranean choreography, allowing for the emergence-becoming of the possibility and potentiality of female corporeality. The trans-forming digital affirms a metamorphic body whose incompleteness offers a potential for the transformation of sexual difference. As the silkworm in *véraison* – "in the moment of ripening and the moment of maturation"⁵³ – identity emerges in forms of being and in-corporation whose fluxes stream towards the future. The inspiration for this *à-venir* comes and signs the encounter between the dancing hands of Boukhari and the thinking body of Jean Luc Nancy:

⁵³ J. Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own", in *Veils* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2001), 91.

Dance: metamorphosis, transformation, plasticity, fluidity, malleability, becoming.... The beginning body is unformed, the dancing body is always to come (it will never reach a final state, a finished shape and stature.... It is a becoming body, a specific corps whose progress or incorporation will never be complete.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ J. L. Nancy, *Alliteration*, 109. My translation.



Figs. 4–5: Nisrine Boukhari, *The veil*, 2007, video still, courtesy of Nisrine Boukhari

In the act of touching and being touched, Boukhari inscribes and disseminates her personal ‘signature’. She choreographs and lets emerge a corporeality that, in its becoming, slips away and displaces the writing of the body on a liquid-digital milieu, while differing the *puissance* or resistance of her poetical–political memory to the ones who consult, and make re-emerge, the virtual eventfulness of her work.



Fig. 6: Nisrine Boukhari, *The veil*, 2007, video still, courtesy of Nisrine Boukhari

Evocated in fragmentary and spectral memory, the choreographic gestures consulted by the matri-archival exercises, recall, reactivate, bear witness, and perform the recent history of the Mediterranean. In the fluctuating gestures of Belaza, the revolutionary weaves of the Arab Springs, which need political elaboration, are released as *cries*; the subversive nakedness of McMillen’s gestures un-veil the existence and resistance of the global feminine in the face of corporeal and intellectual subjugation; the being-body-identity behind and beyond Boukhari’s digital veil touches on the conditions of Syrian refugees who seek a vital escape from the dolorous tangles of war. Might the archival vocation feel satisfied? Too many other stories stay un-archivable, the tragic stories of the no-bodies, with no-names, dispersed in the necropolis of the Mediterranean, ghosts who never emerge among the memories-gestures-fragments that my imaginary matri-archive might exercise. Should my responsibility need confirmation, the Mediterranean matri-archive is, indeed, only an inventive locus for thinking and paying attention to the (m)other, articulating the promise of a dignified, cultural and artistic hospitality to ‘others’ who land on the Mediterranean seashore. If, in the end, it is my I(-eye)

confronting alterity – “It is me, I, with the other, the other within me, it’s one gender going into the other, one language going through the other”⁵⁵ – my imaginary matri-archive records and transmits the interconnection of the choreography of bodily her-stories, never erasing difference, only looking for new visions and alternative archives.

⁵⁵ H. Cixous, “Difficult Joys”, in *The Body and the Text* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 14.

